385

385

THE

SHASTRAS ON UNTOUCHABILITY

REPRINTED FROM "HARIJAN"

OFFICE OF THE REGISTRAR OF BOOKS
24 APR 1935
MADRAS

13

~~Y:45127~~
Y5927:45127
N35

66206

...E MADRAS BRANCH OF THE
...AN SEVAK SANGH.

The Shastras on Untouchability.

Mahamahopadhyaya Shridharshastri Pathak of Dhulia is an erudite Sanskrit scholar of the old school, having received his training in Sanskrit learning in the traditional style. Yet his study of the *Shastras* led him to the conclusion that untouchability, at it is practised to-day, is purely customary in origin and irreligion, inasmuch as it is repugnant to the *Shastras*. The learned Shastri, therefore, wrote a volume on the subject during the 21 days' fast. Being written in Marathi, this is inaccessible to many in India. I therefore propose to summarise its main argument in these columns.

The first point that Shridharshastri makes is that while religious principles such as truth and non-violence remain the same through the ages, religious practice has been subject to constant and deliberate modifications. For instance, it is a notorious fact that the Vedic gods, Agni, Indra, Varuna and others have now receded into the background, Shiva and Vishnu who were unimportant have come into prominence, and men are reverenced whose very names are unknown to the Vedas.

In the *Bhagavata Puran*, we are told how Nanda used to render homage to Indra but, at Krishna's instance, transferred it to their native Govardhan hill.

Many practices current in ancient times were abrogated by the *smritis* as unsuited for the Kali Age (कलि वर्ज्य).

Bodhayana and Manu do not allow Brahmans to till the land, but Parashara subsequently permitted them to follow that calling.

And this list can be indefinitely extended.

The upshot of the whole thing is that we have the right to modify or abolish a practice even if it is expressly enjoined in the *shastras*, when we find it working against the best interests of the community. This right has been exercised in the past all along, and we can exercise it now.

But the abolition of untouchability does not call for the exercise of this indefeasible right. It does not involve any breaking away from scripture or tradition. It only restores to us our ancient liberties of the Vedic age which we had foolishly lost during the subsequent dark ages.

In the Vedic age, the whole community was comprised in the four *varnas*, and no one was supposed to be outside the pale of *Chaturvarnya*.

नास्ति तु पञ्चमः । मनु ।

पञ्चमो नाधिगम्यते । महाभारत ।

All the classes now treated as untouchables were then included in the fourth and last (*antya*) *varna*. Indeed, the word *antyaja*, which later came to be restricted in its application to the outcast, was at first a synonym for *shudra*.

And there were intermarriages between members of different *varnas*. Brahmans were expressly permitted to take a wife from any of the four classes, Kshatriyas out of the three (*i.e.*, except Brahmans) and Vaishyas out of two (*i.e.*, except Brahmans and Kshatriyas). A commentator on Manu quotes a *shruti* as an authority in order to prove that the venerable sage Vasishtha married a *Chandal* woman.

वसिष्ठश्चाण्डालीमुपयेमे इति श्रुतेः। राघवानन्द।

So also there were marriages between Kshatriya men and Brahman women, between Vaishya men and Brahman and Kshatriya women and between Shudra men and Brahman, Kshatriya and Vaishya women, although such unions were naturally looked upon with disfavour and society did its utmost to prevent such misalliances as it thought them to be. But such misalliances did take place and the offspring of such unions were given specific names and assigned a lower status and less dignified occupation than those of the father.

When thus a member of any one of the four classes was free even to marry a member of any other class, it is clear that Vedic society was uninfected by the virus of untouchability.

Not only was there intermarriage between members of the four classes, but a man's class was determined by his character and occupation, and not by his parentage. If a Brahman adopted any occupation other than his own, he was directly admitted into the class which followed that occupation.

ब्राह्मणो हीनवर्णस्य यः कुर्यात्कर्म किञ्चन ।
स तां जातिमवाप्नोति इहलोके परत्र च ॥

कालहिमाद्रि ॥

On the other hand, if a Shudra was found to be a man of high character following a learned profession, he was looked upon as a Brahman, as the author of the Mahabharata tells us.

स्वभावः कर्म च शुभं यत्र शूद्रेपि तिष्ठति ।
विशिष्टः स द्विजातिर्वै विज्ञेय इति मे मतिः ॥

अनुशासनपर्व १४३-५९ ॥

The *Bhagavata Puran*, which is the Bible of the Vaishnavites, expressly lays down that, if the member of any one class betrays the characteristics of any other class, he should be considered as belonging to the latter class *alone*.

यस्य यल्लक्षणं प्रोक्तं पुंसो वर्णाभिव्यञ्जकम् ।
यदन्यत्रापि दृश्येत तत्तेनैव विनिर्दिशेत् ॥

भागवत ७-११ ॥

The *Vayupuran* contains a long list of Kshatriyas like Vishvamitra who became Brahmans on account of their austerities. Indra was the son of Brahma, a Brahman, but became a Kshatriya as he took up a military career (क्षत्रियः कर्मणाभवत् । शान्तिपर्व २२-११ ।). A Shudra became a Brahman if he acquired proficiency in the Vedas.

शूद्रोऽप्यागमसम्पन्नो द्विजो भवति संस्कृतः ॥

अनुशासनपर्व १४३-४६ ॥

शूद्रयोनौ प्रजातस्य सद्‌गुणानुपतिष्ठतः ।
वैश्यत्वं लभते ब्रह्मन् क्षत्रियत्वं तथैव च ॥
आर्जवे वर्तमानस्य ब्राह्मण्यमभिजायते ॥

स्मृति ॥

And a Brahman became a Shudra, if he gave up Vedic studies.

अश्रोत्रिया अननुवाक्या अनग्नयो वा शूद्रसधर्माणो भवन्ति ॥

वसिष्ठसूत्र ॥ ३ ॥

अनधीत्य द्विजो वेदानन्यत्र कुरुते श्रमम् ।
स जीवन्नेव शूद्रत्वमाशु गच्छति सान्वयः ॥

लघ्वाश्वलायनस्मृति २३ ॥

According to the *Vishnupuran*, Ambarisha, a Kshatriya, became the progenitor of a number of Brahman families. According to the *Vayupuran*, there were Shudras as well as Brahmans, Kshatriyas and Vaishyas, among the descendants of Gritsamada. According to the *Agnipuran*. two sons of Nabhaga were Vaishyas but became Brahmans (वैश्यौ ब्राह्मणतां गतौ ।)

Such was the freedom of the Vedic age. But restriction was gradually sought to be enforced, which, in course of

time, became the parent of modern untouchability with all its gradations and ramifications.

As we have already seen, society looked with disfavour on the marriage of a woman of a higher class with a man of a lower class. This disfavour was shown at its highest, in respect of the mating of a Brahman woman, *i.e.*, a woman of the highest class, with a Shudra man, *i.e.*, a man of the lowest class, by a declaration that their offspring known as *chandala* was untouchable. This is the only untouchability by birth known to the *shastras*.

चण्डाल एवैकः प्रतिलोमतः स्पर्शातो निरस्यते ।

कुल्लूक on मनु १०—१२ ॥

But, obviously, there could not be many of such *chandalas*, and the few that were there would die out on account of the rigours to which they were subjected. In any case, it should be clear to the meanest understanding that the millions of people now treated as untouchables can have nothing to do with the *chandala* defined above, if, indeed, such a person ever existed.

The growth of evil is as fast as the growth of good is slow. Untouchability, at first restricted in its scope as above, brought more and more people under its ever widening influence. It extended to the off-spring of all unions discountenanced by society and to tanners and others, the nature of whose occupation necessitated their living apart from the rest of the community, and, at the present day, a *Vaishnava* who observes *Maryada* loves to treat his nearest relations as untouchable.

According to the *Skandapuran*, even a *shvapacha* can have *darshan* of Rameshvar. 'All men are equal there,' it declares in the spirit of the French Revolution, 'no one is smaller and no one is greater':

नात्यूना नाधिकाश्च स्युः किन्तु सर्वे जनाः समाः ।
रामेश्वरमहालिङ्गं यः पश्यति सभक्तिकम् ॥
न तेनतुल्यतामेति चतुर्वेधपि भूतले ।
रामेश्वरमहालिङ्गे भक्तो यः श्वपचोऽपि सन् ॥

According to the *Brahmapuran*, all classes of men are free to take part in the worship of Jagannath at Puri:

ब्राह्मणैः क्षत्रियैर्वैश्यैः शूद्रैश्चान्यैश्च जातिभिः ।
अनेकशतसाहस्रैर्वृतं स्त्रीपुरुषैर्द्विजाः ।
गृहस्थाः स्नातकाश्चैव यतयो ब्रह्मचारिणः ।
स्नापयन्ति तदा कृष्णं मञ्चस्थं सहलायुधम् ॥

The *Padmapuran* permits all classes to join in the worship of Vishnu at the *dolotsava* festival:

आन्दोलनं ततः सर्वैः कर्तव्यं च विशेषतः ।
ब्राह्मणाः क्षत्रिया वैश्याः शूद्रा याश्चान्यजातयः ॥

Brihaspati holds that there is no untouchability in sacred places (तीर्थ) and places of pilgrimage (यात्राः)

तीर्थे विवाहे यात्रायां सङ्ग्रामे राष्ट्रविप्लवे ।
ग्रामदाहे प्रवासे च स्पृष्टास्पृष्टिर्न विद्यते ॥

Smrityarthasara specifically mentions 'Houses of God,' or temples देवगृह in the same connection:

सङ्ग्रामे हट्टमार्गे च यात्रादेवगृहेषु च ।
अग्न्युत्पाते महापत्सु स्पृष्टास्पृष्टिर्न दुष्यति ॥

And Harita goes even so far as to say that, if a man who has attended a festival of Vishnu bathes from fear of pollution, he goes to hell:

उत्सवे वासुदेवस्य यः स्नाति स्पर्शशङ्कया ।
पतितः स नरश्चैव रौरवं नरकं व्रजेत् ॥

The authors of the *shastras* felt untouchability to be a grievous burden which custom wrongly imposed on human beings. They were, therefore, assiduous in devising ways and means for affording readily available relief. For instance, we are told in the *Padmapuran* that even a *Chandala* who bears the vertical Vaishnavite mark on his forehead is pure and entitled to respect.

ऊर्ध्वपुण्ड्रमूर्ध्वरेखं ललाटे यस्य दृश्यते ।
चाण्डालोऽपि स शुद्धात्मा पूज्य एव न संशयः ॥

According to the *Vamanpuran*, a Vaishnava, even if he is an outcast, is not only pure himself, but also purifies the three worlds, and whoever looks down upon a Vaishnava, merely because he happens to be born in a so-called low caste, goes to perdition.

वैष्णवो वर्णबाह्योऽपि पुनाति भुवनत्रयम् ।
शूद्रं वा भगवद्भक्तं निषादं श्वापचं तथा ।
वीक्षते जातिसामान्यं स याति नरकं ध्रुवम् ॥

The Shaivites are no less liberal than the Vaishnavites in their views on this point. According to the *Shivapuran*, even a *Chandala* who has the *tripundra* on his forehead and wears a rosary of *rudraksha* beads is entitled to as much respect as the best of Brahmans.

रुद्राक्षा यस्य गात्रेषु ललाटे तु त्रिपुण्ड्रकम् ।
स चाण्डालोऽपि संपूज्यः सर्ववर्णोत्तमोत्तमः ॥

Such being the power ascribed to the assumption of even external marks, we are not surprised to find the *Padmapuran* declaring that a *shvapacha* devotee is fit for adoration even by the gods.

श्वपचो भक्तियुक्तस्तु त्रिदशैरपि पूज्यते ।

All men including dasyus were accorded the right to perform rites of the Vedic religion.

भूमिपानां च शुश्रूषा कर्तव्या सर्वदस्युभिः ।
वेदधर्मक्रियाश्चैव तेषां धर्मो विधीयते ॥

The five-lettered Shaivite *mantra* नमः शिवाय । can be recited by all including *antyajas*.

अन्त्यजो वाधमो वापि मूर्खो वा पण्डितोऽपि वा ।
पञ्चाक्षरजपे निष्ठो मुच्यते पापबन्धनात् ॥

शिवपुराण ॥

Similarly, recitation of the Vaishnavite twelve-lettered *mantra* ओं नमो भगवते वासुदेवाय । is open to all, as can be seen from the following verse in *Vishnustotra* whcih commences with that *mantra*.

वैश्यो भवति श्रीमान् सुखी शूद्रो भविष्यति ।
अन्त्यजं श्रावयेद्योऽयं पापान्मुक्तो भविष्यति ॥

पद्मपुराण ॥

The same, of course, is the case with Rama-nama.

राम रामेति रामेति रामेति च पुनर्जपन् ।
स चाण्डालोऽपि पूतात्मा जायते नात्र संशयः ॥

पद्मपुराण ॥

We shall now just glance at some illustrations collected by Shridharshastri of the relations subsisting between the so-called outcasts and other classes in ancient times, and bring this series to a close.

In the Mahabharata we are told that members of *all* classes were present in Yudhishthira's palace.

सर्वे म्लेच्छाः सर्ववर्णा आदिमध्यान्तजास्तथा ।
नानादेशसमुत्थैश्च नानाजातिभिरेव च ॥
पर्यस्त इव लोकोऽयं युधिष्ठिरनिवेशने ॥

In the same epic we are informed that Ekalavya, a Nishada, touched the feet of Drona, the famous Brahman teacher, with his head, and that a Nishada woman with her

five sons lived in the Lakshagriha palace, which had been constructed for the Pandavas.

स तु द्रोणस्य शिरसा पादौ गृह्य परंतप ।
निषादी पञ्चपुत्रा तु जातुषे तत्र वेश्मनि ।
कारणाभ्यागता दग्धा................ ॥

The Ramayan, too, bears similar testimony. Sumantra, a cabinet minister of Dasharath, lived many days with Guha, who was a *Kaivarta.*

गुहेन सार्धं तत्रैव स्थितोऽस्मि दिवसान् बहून् ।

Guha is represented as embracing Rama.

तमार्तः सं परिष्वज्य गुहो राघवमब्रवीत् ।

Rama also accepted the hospitality of Shabari.

पाद्यमाचमनीयं च सर्वं प्रादाद्यथाविधि ।

According to the *Bhagavata Puran*, Krishna mixed with all classes as freely as Rama did.

Tbe same freedom was enjoyed by ordinary men. For instance, we read in the Mahabharata that Kaushika, a Brahman, went to the house of Dharmavyadha and received religious instruction from him. According to the *Skandapuran*, a Bhilla wood-cutter drank water in a Brahman's house and received from him the *prasada* of Satyanarayan.

पपौ जलं प्रसादं च भुक्त्वा स नगरं ययौ ।
काष्ठभारवहो भिल्लो गुहराजो बभूव ह ॥

The *Padmapuran* has placed on record the case of a dying *pulkasan* being ministered unto by a Vaishnavite Brahman.

The *Skandapuran* describes a *lubdhaka* as lighting a lamp in a *Shivalaya*.

लुब्धकोऽपि चतुर्दश्यां दीपं दत्त्वा शिवालये।

In the *Varahapuran* we hear of a *vyadha* in Mithila performing *agnihotra* every day.

अग्निं परिचरन्नित्यं वदन् सत्यं सुभाषितम्।

According to the *Skandapuran*, a *vyadha* entered the sanctuary of a *Shivalaya* in company with a Brahman.

(व्याधः) समायातो मुक्तिलिङ्ग समीपतः।
द्विजेन सहितो देवि दृष्ट्वा लिङ्गं सनातनम्॥

The *Padmapuran* similarly describes a king associating a *tantuvaya* (weaver) with him in worship.

अमात्यो राजपत्नी च करंभस्तन्तुवायकः।
राजा विप्रश्च पञ्चैते.................. ॥

In the *Skandapuran* we are told of a Brahman joining a *shabara* in worship as well as at the dining table.

तत्रातिथिमनुप्राप्तं ब्राह्मणं शबरोत्तमः!
भक्ष्यभोज्यविधानैश्च विविधैः समपूजयत्॥
प्रभातायां तु शर्वर्यां तीर्थराजोदकेन तौ।
स्नानं निर्वृत्य विधिवन्माधवं प्रणिपत्य च॥

Not only was there interdining, but there was intermarriage as well. We have already seen how Vasishtha married a Chandala woman. This lady, named Akshamala at first, was later called Arundhati and became the object of universal reverence. In the same way, the mother of Vyasa was a Kaivarta woman, and the mother of Parashara a *shvapaki*.

We hope we have cited authorities and adduced evidence sufficient to convince all who are open to conviction. If any one still remains unconviced perhaps,

ब्रह्मापि तं नरं न रंजयति ।

V. G. D.